

With a Pinch of *Sats*: The Psychological Significance of Performative Impulse in the Performance of Classical Music

Marijan Tucaković

Elly Bašić Music School, Zagreb, Croatia

marijan.tucakovic@gmail.com

Abstract

The theoretical background of this paper lies in interdisciplinary research focusing on similarities and synchronicities of the performing arts (Carlson, 2004). The focus is on the *sats*, which is defined both as a theoretical and practical phenomenon. The anthropology of performance defines *sats* as an impulse and a counter-impulse, while describing all performing arts as sharing a similar base. The aim of this research is to rethink the specific expertise of classical music performers from the perspective of performance theory. More specifically, the aim is to highlight the phenomenon of *sats* (Barba, 1995) and to have it reviewed and considered as a practical tool for classical music performers. The knowledge, expertise, and artistry of classical music performers have persisted and improved for centuries. Recently, new ways and forms of mental training for musicians have emerged as a significant aspect of the performance process, creating a substantial difference (Lehmann et al., 2007). This paper presents options to enrich the quality of classical music performers' expert knowledge and artistry by applying the *sats* phenomenon, both in theory and practice. The case study and examples are based on the interaction of psychology for musicians, performance psychology, performance theory, and experience from pedagogical and artistic practise.

Keywords: *sats*, classical music, performance theory, psychology of performance, psychology for musicians

Introduction and method

Not so long ago, a famous European conductor visited Bali, where he stayed for two weeks and was fascinated by Balinese musical theatre and native gamelan music. What amazed him was the ability of the dancers and percussionists to control vast, gradual speeding-up and slowing-down actions “without a conductor, and without any obvious leadership or physical cues” (Service, 2014, p. 161). “How did that happen?” Maestro asked a little ten-year-old Balinese girl. She replied, “You’ve been

here two weeks, and you still haven’t noticed that it’s the dancers who control it? When they lift their left hand, we play faster, and so on. That’s how it works” (Service, 2014, pp. 161-162). This is a true story about Maestro Simon Rattle and his visit to Bali. The significance of this story came to his mind during a rehearsal with the Berlin Philharmonic, while conducting the orchestra through Jean Sibelius’ *Fifth Symphony*. Rattle used a poetic shortcut by telling the above-mentioned story in order to motivate orchestral players to achieve a long, gigantic *accelerando* in the second part of the first movement. There is an obvious reason for that—as Tom Service (2014, p 160) writes— “a paradoxical phenomenon: the increase of tempo should be imperceptible, since it happens continuously rather than in stages, but the accelerative effect needs to be physical”. Rattle decided to communicate with the orchestra by using a story “to tell them how he discovered the secret to creating this kind of motion” (Service, 2014, p. 161). More precisely, Rattle’s idea comes from his ambition to expand the 2009/2010 Berlin Philharmonic’s season repertoire beyond German authors to the music by Jean Sibelius, a Finnish composer not so familiar to German orchestras. This story serves here as an introduction to the case study that considers the potential interdisciplinary and intercultural layers in performance of (Western) classical music: 1) anthropology of performance and performance theory, 2) psychology for musicians, and 3) psychology of performance.

Inspired by the story about Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic, I’ll take the analyses based on a theoretical background of anthropology of performance and performance studies. The intention is to detect how the Balinese performative technique can be helpful for a classical music performer. The methodological approach in the case study is a comparative analysis and synthesis of performative techniques from the East and the West, in order to identify useful similarities.

Based on the conclusion of the case study, the second part of this paper offers examples from the field of piano playing and choral conducting, as a proposal for an application of *sats* as a body-mind technique. I will try to explain examples in simple but detailed steps and narrative, visually supported by graphic facilitation in the form of figures, with the importance of a positive psychological impact on the preparation and performance of classical music in mind.

Case study: From Bali to Berlin – *sats* is in the air

The intuition of a renowned conductor, such as Simon Rattle, to use his experience from Bali, is actually an example of the specific layer of the human mind analysed by anthropology of performance, defined as a manifestation of *Homo faber*, *Homo erectus*, *Homo ludens*, *Homo sapiens*, *Homo aestheticus*, and *Homo scaenicus* (Dissanayake, 1995; Lukić, 2013). In short, performance studies and anthropology of performance have shown that performing arts share a similar base, regardless of whether it is dance, theatre, opera, a classical music concert, performance art, or contemporary circus. Therefore, there is no doubt about the liminal zone of performance and its interdisciplinarity and interculturality (Carlson, 2004; Schechner, 2002). From another perspective, Rattle's motivational speech aims to foster a specific state of mind among orchestral musicians to achieve a convincing, coherent performance. This is covered in psychology for musicians, encompassing mental training, intrinsic motivation, and artistic purpose (Hallam, 2019; Lehman et al., 2007). The third layer is very significant—an imperative for success—specifically discussed in performance psychology as the pressure present in the entertainment industry (Coterill, 2018). Success is defined not only by high standards of musical performance but also by a (hidden) rule in the pressure to perform effectively, better known as the “perform or else” phenomenon (McKenzie, 2001).

It is unclear whether classical musicians, such as famous conductors, are informed or educated in various performative techniques, except those related to music. What is widely known, however, is that Balinese performative technique consists of four components: (1) *agem*, (2) *tandang*, (3) *tangkis*, and (4) *tangkep*. *Agem* is defined as “attitude” or base position. *Tandang* means “to walk, to move in space”. The central component of the

Balinese performative technique is *tangkis*, which means “transition, the change from one posture, direction, level to another”, followed by the fourth component, *tangkep*, known as “expression” (Barba, 1995, pp. 56-57). Eugenio Barba, a researcher of performative techniques around the globe, with special emphasis on “performance universals that function across the cultures” (Kennedy, 2011, p. 43), explains that *tangkis* literally means “to escape,” “to avoid”. He further describes it as “a way of doing”, a way in which a performer can “escape” the rhythm he or she is following and ultimately create a variation in the design of movements. When *tangkis* is performed quickly and vigorously, through micromovements, it is defined as *angsel*, the essence of which is *keras*, strong. Alternatively, it may be gentle, in which case it is called *seleyog*—soft, supple, and flowing—and *legato* (Barba, 1995, p. 56).

As previously mentioned, Simon Rattle attempted to explain the moment of transition during a long-lasting *accelerando*. He aimed to encourage players in the orchestra to take more responsibility for the performance and to make himself less necessary (functioning only as *primus inter pares*). The idea is compelling, but, as Rattle himself admitted, not entirely achievable. Therefore, the conductor decides to give cues, but he does it in a much more restrained manner, risking that the performance may fall apart. Deeper and profound knowledge of performative techniques leads one to the phenomenon of *tangkis* present in other cultures, known as “energy potential” in Peking Opera, “pre-acting” used by Konstantin Sergeievich Stanislavsky, “otkaz” developed by Vsovolod Meyerhold, and “pre-movement” by Jerzy Grotowski, to name only a few. The above-mentioned phenomena can be defined under the umbrella term *sats*, predominantly used by Eugenio Barba (1995). It originates from Norwegian and, in the literal sense, it means motion. In the academic field of performance theory, *sats* is defined as “the moment in which the action is thought/acted by the entire organism, which reacts with tensions, even in immobility. It is the point at which one decides to act. There is a muscular, nervous and mental commitment, already directed towards an objective. It is the tightening or the gathering together of oneself from which the action departs” (Barba, 1995, p. 54). It is crucial to distinguish isolated gestural movements from the rest of the performer's body, for example, a conductor's beat gestures or a pianist's finger action during piano-

playing exercises. The importance of *sats* lies in linking separate actions with the sense of the entire body. The *sats* engages the entire body: “*sats* is impulse and counterimpulse” (Barba, 1995, p. 55). It is related to both the body and mind.

Application of *sats* in classical music performance

It is well known that musicians perform demanding pieces of music, artworks, and masterpieces that are very challenging, both technically and musically. Technical superiority is a *conditio sine qua non* for professional musicians, the physical component of performance, the ability of body and mind to perform most *virtuoso* music scores (Hallam, 2019; Lehman et al., 2007). The importance of the body-mind connection for pianistic technical learning is quite thoroughly presented by pianist Miguel L. Henriques (2014). His focus is on health issues and the potential for mental work, the speed of mental processing (“reflexes” and “whips,” pp. 75-101), instantaneous and coincident attack and rest commands, proprioception, and specifics of the hand and fingers. The possible role of *sats* to improve/encourage technique lies in the fact that *sats* is “the tiny keystone of every physical action. It makes it possible for the performer to be technically precise even when working according to the ‘magic if’ and ‘emotional memory’ procedures” (Barba, 1995, p. 58).

I would like to offer two simple examples from the fields of piano playing and choral conducting to illustrate the point. For a detailed presentation, the workshop format would be more appropriate. The first example (Figure 1) is Carl Czerny’s *Etude* op. 849, no. 25. If students use a well-known, traditionally suggested method, namely, to practise the entire *Etude* in very slow tempo and forte first, using the individual strength of each finger, they may become bored, exhausted, and discouraged. Encouraged by the idea of making practice interesting and creative, as many psychologists of musical performance suggest, I will present an approach from the performative perspective.



Figure 1. Carl Czerny: *Etude* op. 849, no. 25 (Fragment)

Conversely, if students apply the concept of *sats* in practice and create a “*sats*-state of mind and body”—that is, work in a “*sats*-way”—the finger-focused method is likely to be enriched by an awareness of what occurs between individual finger movements, throughout the entire body and mind. This includes an embodied sense of transition between movements, sound, touch, the vibration of an instrument, and space. Another traditional (mainstream) way of practising is to change the rhythm (Figure 2) to achieve a faster tempo.

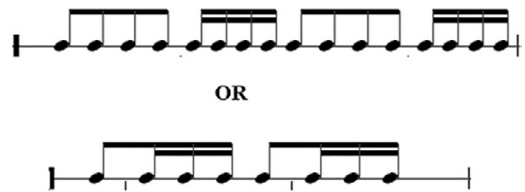


Figure 2. Example of rhythmic changes – a traditional way of practising sixteenth notes in Carl Czerny’s *Etude* op. 849, no. 25

Figure 3 shows that the rhythm method should not be used for its own sake but should be enriched with ideas of transition and decision-making to produce a faster, more active movement.



Figure 3. Example of a proposal for the application of *sats* as a body-mind technique

The same principle applies to Figure 4: awareness of the transition and of what is happening in the moment (an active body-mind system). In Figures 3 and 4, the sign X is to indicate “mental click” – a performative impulse – in which the inner activation, intention and decision to act should emerge and create *sats* momentum.

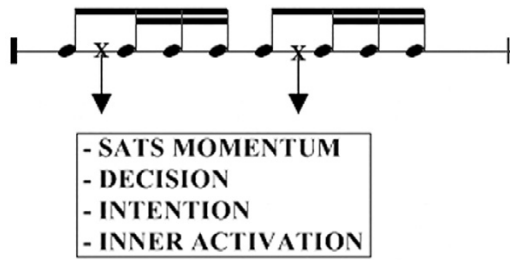


Figure 4. Example of a proposal for the application of *sats* as a body-mind technique

To conclude the discussion about practising Czerny’s *Etude*, Barba’s words are appropriate: “in physical behaviour the transition from intention to action is a typical example of difference in potential” (1995, p. 54).

As an introduction to the second example, the following may serve as a very appropriate metaphorical and poetical definition of *sats*: “It is the spring before it is sprung. It is the attitude of the feline ready for anything: to bounce forward, to withdraw, to return to a position of rest. An athlete, a tennis player or boxer, immobile or moving, ready to react. It is John Wayne facing an adversary. It is Buster Keaton about to take a step. It is Maria Callas on the verge of an aria” (Barba, 1995, pp. 54-55).

How can a musician practise *sats*? Let us take a choral conductor as an example. Colin Durant (2003, p. 113) writes that “basic psychology will tell us that people will respond to challenge more efficiently if they experience pleasure sensations in the activity. The creation by conductors, therefore, of a positive, encouraging atmosphere is integral to this response to musical challenges”. To create such an atmosphere, I first suggest that the conductor achieve a *sats*-state. As a musician, the conductor has to be convinced of his/her musical concept, respecting musicological facts about the piece and style, as well as historically informed facts. However, the conductor is not only a musician but also a performer. If the conductor is aware that *sats* is “a minute charge with which the thought innervates the action and is experienced as thought-action, energy, rhythm in space” (Barba, 1995, p. 57), they will be able to create an effective body-mind connection when shaping music through gestures. Figure 5 presents the opening of *Ave Maria* by Ivan Zajc.



Figure 5. Ivan Zajc: *Ave Maria* (Fragment)

In a “*sats*-manner”, during the vocal warm-up, the conductor asks the singers, as the first step, to perform a four-part vocalise legato from beginning to end (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Example of a proposal for the application of *sats* as a body-mind technique for *Ave Maria* by Ivan Zajc

Figure 7 illustrates the next step of vocal warm-up based on the “*sats*-manner”. As a help, I use the sign Θ (half-vowel), which is an “ingredient” of every vowel and is present in the moment of transition. The conductor asks the singers to sing a four-part vocalise legato, but with a fully aware transition from one vowel to the next, focusing their thoughts and presence on the beginning and the ending of each vowel. It is a quite fast and short moment, but a highly important performative impulse.



Figure 7. An illustration of a *sats* supplement for the four-part vocalise

Thirdly, and most importantly, the conductor should announce that they will stop unexpectedly at a random vowel and silently wait for some time (Figure 8). During the silence, the conductor encourages the singers to feel the moment, their body and the environment (space) to actively participate in silence, creating an active peace (*sats momentum*).

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of 'Ave Maria' by Ivan Zajc. It is written for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B) voices. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo/mood is marked 'legato'. The lyrics 'A - E - J O - U' are written below the vocal lines. A box labeled 'SATS MOMENTUM' is placed over the vocal lines, indicating a specific technique. The score shows the vocalists entering with a sustained chord and then moving to the next notes.

Figure 8. Example of a proposal for the application of *sats* as a body-mind technique for *Ave Maria* by Ivan Zajc

Then, with a cue that comes from the conductor's "sats-moment", they signal the choir to continue to vocalise. In the "state-of-sats", the choir is ready to sing *Ave Maria* in a fresh, mesmeric atmosphere.

Conclusion

Lifelong learning for musicians to continuously improve their musical skills might seem difficult, and sometimes even harsh. Having that in mind, the implication of this paper is to present both the theoretical and practical examples of *sats* application and its implications. The main aim is to offer the renewed methods and techniques that classical music performers use during preparation and performance. Examples offered and described (both verbally and visually) - Carl Czerny's *Etude* op. 849, no. 25 and Ivan Zajc's *Ave Maria* - serve as a general illustration of the application of *sats* in classical music performance. As mentioned earlier, a workshop format would be more effective, vivid, and applicable. With regular practice, the expected outcomes include stronger engagement and a more prepared presence, with more confident, stress-free, and authentic performance. Further directions for exploration focus on creativity and innovation in the field of classical music as performance.

References

- Barba, E. (1995). *The paper canoe*. Routledge.
- Carlson, M. (2004). *Performance: A critical introduction*. Routledge.
- Coterill, S. T. (2018). *The psychology of performance*. Routledge.
- Dissanayake, E. (1995). *Homo aestheticus: Where art comes from and why?* University of Washington Press.
- Durante, C. (2003). *Choral Conducting: Philosophy and Practise*. Routledge.
- Hallam, S. (2019). *The psychology of music*. Routledge.
- Henriques, M. G. (2014). *The (well) informed piano: Artistry and knowledge*. University Press of America.

- Kennedy, D. (Ed.). (2011). *The Oxford companion to theatre and performance*. Oxford University Press.
- Lehman, A. C., Sloboda, J. A., & Woody, R. H. (2007). *Psychology for musicians: Understanding and acquiring the skill*. Oxford University Press.
- Lukić, D. (2013). *Uvod u antropologiju izvedbe [Introduction to the anthropology of performance]*. Leykam International.
- McKenzie, J. (2001). *Perform or else: From discipline to performance*. Routledge.
- Schechner, R. (2002). *Performance studies: An introduction*. Routledge.
- Service, T. (2014). *Music as alchemy: Journeys with great conductors and their orchestras*. Faber and Faber.

<https://doi.org/10.17234/9789533793085.13>